

Welcoming Remarks
21st Century Learner Conference
November 7, 2001

Good afternoon, and welcome. I am Robert Martin, Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and it is my pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the staff of IMLS to this conference on the 21st Century Learner. Thank you for coming to what we expect to be an extremely interesting and stimulating conversation on the role that libraries and museums play in support of informal education.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services was created in 1996 by the Museum and Library Services Act, which essentially merged the Federal programs for supporting the nations museums and libraries, transferring the library programs out of the Department of Education and grafting them on to what had been the Institute of Museum Services. The rationale that drove this merger was the simple recognition that museums and libraries are both social agencies for public education. This conference today

is designed to focus our attention on this common mission of museums and libraries, to reaffirm its central importance, and to explore some new and innovative approaches to addressing our educational responsibilities.

I am pleased to be leading this fine agency. IMLS is the primary source of federal grants for the nation's libraries and museums. It is an independent Federal agency that fosters leadership, innovation, and a lifetime of learning. Our major goal is to provide grants and leadership activities that help build the educational capacity of our constituency. Our grants build institutional capacity, support core library and museum services, and encourage excellence. IMLS is a catalyst for leadership. We take an active part in championing the role libraries and museums play in our society. As a federal agency we have a responsibility to place a national spotlight on the outstanding work that you do and on the enormous contributions you make. We do this in a number of ways through conferences, such as this one, through

encouraging best practices through our Web site and National Awards program, by offering training on outcome based evaluation and through our publications. All of our leadership activities endeavor to establish that libraries and museums are essentially educational institutions.

Libraries and museums provide a plethora of resources and services for their communities. They preserve our rich and diverse culture and history and transmit it from one generation to the next. They provide social settings for numerous community activities. They support economic development. They provide extraordinary opportunities for recreation and enjoyment. And perhaps most important, they serve as a primary social agency in support of education, providing resources and services that complement the structures of formal education and extend education into an enterprise that lasts the length of the lifetime. In my view, all of the numerous and varied roles and functions that libraries and museums play in their communities fall into one of three

overlapping categories: education, information, and recreation. Of these the most important is education.

I am a historian by both training and inclination, and so I want to review for a minute the history of our educational mission. What we know today as the American Public Library first came into existence in Boston about 150 years ago. There was no doubt in the minds of the founders of the Boston Public Library that its mission was to be primarily educational. In their report to the Boston City Council, the trustees of the Library proposed that the public library in Boston would be “the crowning glory of our system of City schools” and “the utmost importance as the means of completing our system of public education.” George Ticknor, the leader of the civic library movement in Boston, often spoke of the role of the library in terms of its educational mission. Communities that followed the Boston model and founded libraries in the 1850s and 1860s were explicit in citing the library’s purpose to support and extend the agencies of formal education in the community.

The education theme has remained a constant in the discourse of the American Library Profession. In 1946 ALA promulgated a new *National Plan for Public Library Service*, which again asserted that “the public library is an essential unit in the American educational system.... It comes closer than any other institution to being the capstone of our educational system.”

In 1955, testimony in support of the first federal legislation to support library development, the Library Services Act, consistently argued the educational importance of the public library, asserting that libraries were second only to schools in the capacity educate citizens. Librarian of Congress L. Q. Mumford testified that “for most people the public library is the chief—and sometimes the only—means of carrying on their education after they leave school.”

Similarly museums in America began with an essentially educational purpose. In Europe the first museums were established to preserve royal collections; in America they were often founded with the notion of public education clearly in mind. Long before

the Tax Reform Act of 1969 officially designated museums as educational institutions, American museums embraced the notion that they should communicate the essence of ideas, impart knowledge, encourage curiosity and promote esthetic sensibility. If collections are the heart of museums, what we have come to call education is the spirit.

One of the earliest museums in America was the Peale Museum in Philadelphia, established by Charles Willson Peale in 1786. Peale saw his museums as a commercial as well as an educational undertaking; he understood the need to connect his content to his audience's interests in a lively manner if he expected them to pay the admission fees that his museum required for its operation. Peale's museum was characteristic of a genre that saw its collections as representing the entire world. Its collections grew to over one hundred thousand specimens, collected and exhibited with two purposes in mind – to education and to entertain. It is important to remember that early museums such as Peale's developed long before universal public schooling became

common; they, along with the church and the library, were important institutions concerned with public education.

Over the years this essential educational focus has ebbed and flowed. At some times our institutions are more true to their historical beginnings than at other times. Museums have struggled over the primacy of their educational mission as opposed to the primacy of their collecting and scholarship mission. Libraries have clashed over whether their primary mission is to provide information or knowledge. I am especially concerned that in recent years the importance of education has almost disappeared from the rhetoric of librarians, replaced by a focus on information. Providing information and supporting education are not the same things. There is a difference between information and knowledge, and the most important role of the library is not providing access to information, it is supporting, enhancing, and facilitating the transfer of knowledge—in other words, education.

This conference is delivered in the spirit of John Cotton Dana, a person who is very important to both libraries and

museums. He was director of the Free Public Library of Newark from 1901 until his death in 1929 and simultaneously the director of the Newark Museum Association from 1909 until his death. He was one of the most passionate promulgators of museum and libraries as institutions of learning. He believed education was a social responsibility and should be their primary missions.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention in my remarks the terrible events that took place on September 11. All of us were transformed by those events. Perhaps we all now share a sense of having entered a dreadful new age in which cherished features of our existence that we once took for granted seem remote and distant. But in the past weeks we have also witnessed marvelous examples of museums and libraries reaffirming their central role in the life of their communities. We must take inspiration from these examples. We must actively assert the fundamental role that museums and libraries play in our democratic society.

Our country's libraries and museums are uniquely American institutions. As the National Foundation for the Art and

Humanities Act says, “Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens.” We know that for democracy to survive and thrive, for people to be able to participate freely and effectively in governing themselves, citizens must be both educated and informed. Our founding fathers knew this, and often spoke of the importance of education. Many might quote Jefferson or Madison at a time like this, but you know, I am a Texan, and so I would like to quote a famous Texan in support of my point. The second President of the Republic of Texas, Mirabeau Bonapart Lamar, put it as well as anyone when he said "the cultivated mind is the guardian genius of Democracy." LIBRARIES and MUSEUMS CULTIVATE MINDS. They are central to educating and informing the citizens of our country. They preserve our rich and diverse culture and history and transmit it from one generation to the next. They are cornerstones of community engagement and help us find connections to each other and the world in which we live. And they provide rich and stimulating opportunities for recreation and enjoyment.

This work is so important. In these troubled times, let us not forget that the work we do in museums and libraries is important. It is fundamental to what we believe and who we are as a people. And we must carry that message forward to the public and elected officials to ensure that museums and libraries have the resources they need to provide essential programs and services to the communities that they serve.

We hope this conference on the 21st Century Learner will develop some new insights into how we might accomplish this. This conference was the inspiration of a very special person at the IMLS, Beverly Sheppard. Beverly came to the IMLS to serve as the Deputy Director for Museum Services. When Diane Frankel left in 1999, Beverly was made Acting Director. Shortly thereafter the Deputy for Library Services left, and for more than two years Beverly Sheppard really did three jobs. The fact that most people in the museum and library world never noticed is a tribute to Beverly's energy, skill and vision. I want to recognize her leadership today. She had the initial idea for this conference, and

she is largely responsible for the shape and content of the program.

And I will now turn the podium over to Beverly to provide an overview of what is to come.